

Jasmine Infiniti

I Didn't Have Any Choice But to Become an Artist

I love to dance and have ever since I was little. Growing up in the Bronx, I was on step teams and in different Boys and Girls Club events, always involved in dancing. I was even a choreographer. All kinds of dancing, but mostly hip-hop. As far back as high school.

High school was in the Bronx. I went to a school that doesn't exist anymore: Foreign Language Academy of Global Studies in the South Bronx. It was just a small magnet school of six hundred students. I knew everyone and everyone knew me, and it was kind of awesome. Talk about safe spaces. It was a great experience. Actually, my high school experience was really exceptional, as a queer person, because that's not common. Not so common in the Bronx, either.

I was one of four or five out people. And we ran that school. As a teenager, I was a gay boy, but always hyper feminine. Probably even more so back then. I was able to really be myself in school. The staff at school was really cool. My first altercation was when some kid bullied me. I put him in his place—publicly. After that, everyone had respect for me, and that made me feel really confident.

I was a singer, too. I sang a lot. I was always in chorus in school and at Boys and Girls Club. I took drum. I know how to play the drums. I took violin in high school, but none of that really stuck. Not really a church music person. I was a tenor. Since I was a little kid, I had singing groups. We did R&B, wrote our own songs, too. I always had this kind of ringleader vibe. Always getting everyone involved in stuff.

In high school I didn't really go out. We were such nerds, honestly. I would play hooky to go to the queer section at Barnes and Noble to read books and talk about them, and then go to the piers. I never had a fake ID. It wasn't until I was in college that I started going out. There was so much nightlife in New York back then. I would go to Splash and Krash and these big clubs that don't exist anymore—Limelight and Avalon, those kinds of places. That was my real introduction to techno and queerness.

That was before I found the ballroom scene. Even though I became very intrigued by ballroom music, I didn't consider that techno then. It was more house music and disco. There were obviously techno aspects to it, but I didn't make the connection back then. It wasn't until the clubs that I really found techno and danced for hours to it. Krash was a mix of house and techno, or anything Junior Vasquez was playing. The nightlife scene was richer back then, I feel. It seemed that way. There would be drag performances but by trans women. All of this stuff would be put all into one big, jam-packed night.

I went to St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. That was crazy. It was definitely culture shock to come from the city—an inner-city kid—where I was mostly surrounded by people of color, to then go really far



Basement NY, club in Queens

upstate. It was this affluent school. Sorority girls, that kind of world. I arrived as this queer, black person. Of course, everyone loved me.

I was really lucky in my educational experiences to have such welcoming places. I initially studied Psychology. But I ended up graduating some ten years later in Creative Writing with a Gender Studies minor. I started Gender Studies freshman year, and that's when I dropped out and started transitioning. So that helped me then.

I started transitioning the summer I became twenty-one. I came back to the city. My family wasn't happy. I was kicked out, and stayed with different friends. That went on for years, actually. I ended up discovering my cousin. She was queer. We met randomly in the Village. I ended up living with her sometime later. And so that was kind of cool for a while. Then it was just the dark, dark side of being trans, having to do survival sex work. Survival took over my life. I didn't have time to worry about aspirations or goals even though I still had them.

What I wanted to do was a magazine of my own, called *Gag Mag*. I wanted it to be a queer entertainment

magazine. I interviewed Nome Ruiz from Jessica Six. I was a big fan of hers. There was just so much talent back then, but there was not as much coverage or notoriety that came with queer artists. I was always trying to bring attention to that. I didn't know that I would become an artist.

Then there was another kind of party in Brooklyn: GHE20GOTH1K and Cherry Bomb and Juliana Huxtable's parties, like Windows. There just wasn't as much grassroots queerness to it. Coming from the big club scene, I didn't even know about those parties. Those were two totally different worlds even though they're both queer and definitely had techno-related music. The big club scene had bouncers. All very corporate, white gay, although Krash and Splash were Latinx.

I think my prime going out period started around 2010. The Brooklyn queer of color scene was really going off. That's when I was interning for Venus X, who hosted GHE20GOTH1K. That was kind of a weird position. She needed someone to help her do music research on Facebook. I love music, I love techno, and I love the ballroom scene. What was really special about

GHE20GOTH1K was the blending of those worlds. Whereas at the clubs there would be the queens in the back voguing to techno, but they weren't necessarily bringing in that ballroom music of Mike Q or LSDXOXO. All those DJs that started merging techno, house, and ballroom sounds were really getting their start from GHE20GOTH1K. I found that amazing. That was something that I had always wanted to marry in this way.

New York was a center for that, although ballroom music itself comes from so many places—Baltimore club music, for example. Bounce music is in there. That's just a cultural thing with people of color: booty, booty, booty! Ballroom music developed in the tristate area and then spread out: that marrying of bitch beats, house music, and artists like Kevin Aviance just saying cunty things over tracks.

Those things merged, at least for me, in the New York scene. I love playing bitch beats and I love playing vogue tracks and I love playing techno. It's all of that merging, and I'm from New York, so I guess I guess it's a New York thing. But it's all over the place now. Lots of awesome tracks that I love are produced by people from all over and not necessarily even involved in the ballroom scene or anything. But they still make great music, right?

So I had dropped out of college and gone back to New York to transition. And there's that survival period there. But then I went back and finished college. Before even starting to do sex work I was arrested and accused of being a prostitute. I eventually ended up winning all this money in a lawsuit. So that was a new beginning for me, financially. I didn't have to do sex work anymore. It made sense to go back to school, because I had a free ride.

I made a new generation of friends at St. Lawrence. There were more queer people, and also other trans people at school. That was a new experience for me. As a queer person at St. Lawrence, I had already left a mark that paved the way for other people who were going to school there, who had even heard of me from when I'd been there before. So that was cool. It's so weird being this trailblazer. Everyone kind of looks up to you in this particular way. They expect this strong, confident, headstrong person. It's exhausting. Being ahead of the curve can break you down over time. Even though you're paving the way for other people, you're losing pieces of yourself. You're being ravaged by the world. It's always been this weird thing. The people who have felt that I made space possible for them end up being people who care for me the most because they have the strength now.

After I graduated, I moved to California, and that opened up a whole world. I went to California for someone who's now an ex. I knew him here in New York when I was in a dark spiral. We were basically just stuck together in some weird way. Then I went to school to get myself together and he went to rehab in California because he's from

there. He supposedly got his shit together; I got my shit together. And then, together in California, neither of us had our shit together. And it just wasn't what it was supposed to be. But I ended up making awesome friends and having an amazing life there. I was working for nonprofits with trans people and queer people, and became kind of iconic in my own right, just being a light and whatnot for people. I loved my job. I loved working with the trans community. I had so much freedom and it afforded me the money and interactions with people to start throwing parties.

That was the start of the New World Disorder party. Before we started that were throwing parties with a friend who had access to a warehouse. This was with Burning Man type people out there. Moving to California introduced me to a whole other kind of world revolving around techno, around drum and bass and house music and raves, actual raves. Coming from New York, raves weren't really happening then. New York was about clubs.

New World Disorder started around 2015 or 2016. One of my roommates would just hear me listening to beats and stuff and said, "Oh my God, you would love my friend Mitch, aka K'hole Kardashian. He loves that kind of music." Finding someone who knew ballroom music so far away from New York was a big deal for me, especially being out there and being from New York and not really knowing anyone. It was very underground.

I was just a host, you know, a face for the party, but I really wanted to learn to DJ and produce. One of my friends and cofounders of New World Disorder, Erica Mar, was a DJ and producer. She gave me my start. She was producing witch house music back then, which I loved. I still love it, honestly. I love all kinds of music. You'd be surprised. Bored Lord was friends with Mitch and she would give me pointers. I was already a fan of Bored Lord as well. Before she was DJing as she is now, she was doing vocal music and performing.

New World Disorder and Club Chai started developing at the same time. Both were about genre-bending music. Club Chai was started by two Bay Area natives who also thought it was important to center queer and trans people. To me, and to us, it was just queer music. Taking club sounds back. Prior to Juliana Huxtable, Venus X, and the Brooklyn scene, there were not many trans people, femmes, women at the forefront of these spaces in nightlife. Especially as trans people, we were supposed to stay in the bubble of being an "attraction." I wanted to change that. Even though trans women were a big part of San Francisco nightlife, they were often performers, or working the door, or hosts. Similarly in New York, trans women were just these sexualized dolls used for decoration.

There was this one place called Asia SF. They had bachelor and bachelorette parties there. I tried out to

dance on stage there—a buck’s a buck. They said I was too tall. It was just unfortunate to me that we had to allow these places to reduce us to being an attraction, like, “you wouldn’t believe it, but this is a man!” or whatever.

Those places were basically chaser clubs. There was another one called Divas. I would go there since I had friends who worked there. It was just a place where trans people could make money, whether they were bartending, coming in and doing outreach, doing sex work, or working as dancers. I remember I was drunk one time and just ran through that place, yelling at all the chasers.

California was where I started DJing. We even had parties at Divas. I’d always wanted to do one at Asia SF, actually. San Francisco was in love with us. It was a magical coming together of friends. You see that in lots of different places, but I never had that in New York, with friends coming together and being creative and making something, and then actually doing it. Trans people coming together. We had the time, we had the energy, the resources, the connections, and we made something amazing happen. It was inspired by GHE20GOTH1K and everything that was happening in New York, but it had its own California flair. I think we created something new that also inspired other scenes.

And then I ended up back in New York. Nothing’s ever completely my choice. I’m just rolling with the punches, literally. We were visiting New York—me, Cali Rose, and Bella Bags, formerly known as London Jade. We had just thrown a party at the House of Yes in Bushwick. That party was chill, but the bouncers were rude to many of the guests. The bill ended up with so many big names on it. They made us feel like we weren’t enough. They wanted us to have another big name and another, all this kind of stuff. And I thought, “we’re all big names in our own right, you know?” We would draw, especially back then. Their attitude was a slap in the face.

I got attacked after that party. We on our way to go to *unter* or something. We were walking past Happyfun Hideaway [a local queer bar] and I tried to go into this liquor store around the corner. I guess it was after the Puerto Rican Day Parade, so people were just drunk and messy, and these guys attacked us. I was in the hospital, and the doctor said that after the surgery, I’d need to come in for checkups. I stayed in New York rather than going back to California. I was supposed to continue on a tour, but that got cut short. I ended up here for six months, recovering. I could not afford to pay for my rent in California. I was back in New York, and I’ve been back ever since.

That was 2017 or 2018. Then we started doing New World Disorder here at Bossa Nova Civic Club, but it wasn’t the same. It was still great, but the parties in California that we had in the beginning were amazing. It was the start of something. I feel it never quite got to the level that it

should have in New York, but I do feel it made a difference. And I feel, more importantly than anything, that there was community formed around it and friendships made. And it inspired other people to create other parties. But it’s hard being a queer, black, trans person and doing this stuff. Especially in New York. It is so competitive here. It’s just hard. It’s hard to keep going.

I started producing around the same time as New World Disorder was taking off. I would mess around with Traktor, just looping tracks and making different kinds of patterns. Friends would say, “that’s a remix!” I would think to myself, oh, okay, that’s a remix. Then it was a matter of having that confidence and going from there. I learned Ableton. Bored Lord, Cali Rose, Mitch, and I would have these workshop days that were just us hanging out, smoking weed, messing around on CDJs—while one of us is on a CD JSR Versa, the other would be messing around on a computer with Ableton.

The Bay Area scene was psychedelic. That was the context where I was first learning Ableton, also with this guy 23 Odd Cats. He’s a DJ that I know from California. He’s more Burning Man and psytrance, drum and bass style. I was on ketamine, and he showed me Ableton and I’m like “wow, I get it.” And even to this day, there are things I know that I don’t necessarily remember learning.

Particularly in California, the rave scene was psychedelic. Ketamine and Molly and hippy-flipping (Molly and mushrooms). Mushrooms are a huge part of the culture of raves and music there. In New York, back in my day, in the gay clubs it was just cocaine and alcohol, over and over. Maybe ecstasy, sometimes. In California, there was definitely a more accountable approach with drugs. The DanceSafe people, for instance, making sure people drink water. Especially because of Burning Man and the desert, a lot revolved around keeping people safe while they’re having fun. I feel that in New York, it’s harder to do that.

In New York, we’re in a more oppressive environment. There’s not the freedom to be sloppy off in in the hills somewhere, rolling around on Molly. But I do feel with more substances being legalized, or available as treatments, attitudes change. It’s so great that you can smoke weed now in New York. I’ve been arrested for doing that here. It’s changing the perception of drug use, its role in the scene. With ketamine, there are studies of its uses, like for depression, that are maybe making it a little more acceptable for people to use.

I don’t necessarily condone that either, you know, people just willy-nilly doing stuff. It can be dangerous, but I do think that drugs have influenced techno music. There’s a connection between minimal techno and ketamine. Once I was in Pittsburgh with some folks from the Honcho party, and we were listening to a woman who does this amazing minimal techno. You could hear every little detail. Music is very mathematical, right? With ketamine, you really tune in

to this mathematical side. You can feel the physics. A certain precision.

There's always been stoner music. I love The Doors and stuff like that. I'm down for a trippy stoner vibe. Growing up, a blunt and voguing went well together, too. We smoked a lot. And then we'd vogue and we'd listen to Kevin Jay Z Prodigy, and even in the song he says, "pass the blunt Miss Thing, girl!" It's definitely in the music, and the culture, but that's a whole other conversation.

BXTCH SLÄP (2020) was not my first project. I released *SiS* (2018) and *Art and Performance* (2019) and some other things. *BXTCH SLÄP* was my first really well received one. Over that period, I had a lot of notoriety. We were doing New World Disorder all over the world. I was traveling a lot for the first time. That was very much a new experience and a very hard experience. Everyone is like, "you're traveling and oh my god, so lucky!" I am lucky and it is amazing, but it's hard as a black trans person. Many people's understanding of traveling is just the most glamorous aspects of it. As a black trans person, I've been detained, I've been denied entry into places. Going to countries can be like going to clubs. The bouncers of the country are like, "It's a private event."

Being in the airport so much with my computer, I would just work and work on my music using Ableton. I start making things while traveling—working on most of *BXTCH SLÄP* at the same time I put out the *SiS* ep with Club Chai. *Art and Performance* was kind of a test run of me publishing my own tracks. *BXTCH SLÄP* was made the year before the pandemic. I wasn't going to release it just yet, but then pandemic hit. People were talking about Covid, but I was just focused on working on my album. I didn't know what was going on in the world.

I was planning on going to Mexico. Then I got really sick, but apparently not with Covid. I couldn't go to Mexico, so I just put my album out and then it blew up. There was so much love and so much support for it. A lot of people have told me that it helped get them through the lockdown, and I'm always touched by that. It's also been surreal because even now, I can't believe people have actually listened to it. Since it came out during the early isolation of the pandemic, it never really hit me.

It seemed to resonate with people's mood during the lockdown even though I made it before the pandemic. There was this vibe I felt even before. I've always wanted to express these darker vibes. I look at music as a sculptor might. I get the materials and just have this lump of sounds sitting there, and then I chisel away at it until it starts to sound like something. I say it's techno, but I'm not sure that it's actually techno. What *is* techno? That's a question. But maybe what my music does is define what it could be, or what else it could be. Genres can be limiting.

Maybe it wasn't a "dark" album so much as a realist one. That's just the mood, right? Here I am in my demon hole again. There's a track called "Demonhole." That was some movie my roommate and I were watching while I was working on this track in my headphones. That whole album is melancholic. But also, there's some driving, angry kind of loudness to it—this repetition. Plus, a certain amount of pure rage, but shaped into something.

I've never played piano or anything. I learned drums and the violin, but that was random. I do have these melodic moments, but I'm obviously not classically trained. I don't really know how to execute proper chord progressions. I'm continuing to learn. I think it's important as a queer, black person to not be so bound by the rules that are set, because even just as queer people, the rules weren't made for us. We have to find our own way.

I feel I've just been finding my own way in the music. I love these ethereal feelings, like you're in cave or somewhere where there are magical sounds going on. Or in a graveyard or something. It's funny, I had never actually been to some of the places I imagined the tracks could be the soundtrack for. I have ended up visiting some of them since, once things opened up and I was touring again. Glasgow Necropolis, for instance.

In my next projects, I hope that I get to have some visuals to go along with some of the tracks that reflect the mood and vibe, because I do consider myself an artist in that way. Everything up until now, including *BXTCH SLÄP*, has been me testing the waters and just taking a chance, but I feel it has been building up to something bigger and better. I just need to be in a good place to be able to work.

Everything that I've done, or every choice that I've made, has been in the thick of it. Nothing has ever actually been a plan. It all works out, but how can queer, black, trans people make plans in this world? Everything can just be taken away at a moment's notice. Look at the pandemic, look at how that affected everyone's plans. But especially when you're queer and black and trans, sometimes it's just about making it through the day.

I've gone through all these weird phases where I'm free, and I'm happy, and I don't care. But then, being popular and well known—everyone has an opinion. Everyone wants to let you know their opinion. It's okay, but being a black, queer, trans person and being notable is a weird position to straddle. For example, I need to access queer services and stuff, too. And then when I do, they'll know who I am. You don't get to be incognito in the waiting room. I used to be punk and not care about what I might be wearing or how I look in certain pictures and stuff. That comes back to haunt me.

There's pressure when you're iconic. But where's my hair stylist? For public appearances, I'm having to rely on me and my limited wardrobe, but then also have to respond to



BXTCH SLAP by Jasmine Infiniti, cover

this demand for even just pictures of me. There was even a time during the pandemic, there were a lot of people asking to photograph me and I don't even have my lashes done.

The pressure around how you look effects how you get treated. If bouncers don't know that I'm the DJ, and I just come in a hoodie and a sweatshirt, they ask, "why aren't

you dressed up?" How people perceive me obviously has something to do with not being the stereotypical ideal of what a trans woman in nightlife is supposed to be. You're supposed to be this glammed up thing. There's nothing wrong with that. It's just not me.

The dolls set incredibly high standards for each other. And then I'm just coming in my Docs and whatever. I have a

different purpose. I feel it's good in a lot of ways because it's pushing this idea that not everyone has to come glammed up all the time. That makes space for other people to feel comfortable. And I've been told that.

Pressure is still a hard thing deal with, though. Especially being a black, trans woman. Sometimes I'll go to these venues and the bouncers may not necessarily know who I am. They'll treat me how they are used to treating someone like me. They'll be rude as hell. It can be black masculinity versus queer, trans, black femininity, just that kind of bumping heads that was always being talked about even in the Black Lives Matter movement. How unaccepting the black community can be of its own people if they're queer, especially if they're trans, and especially if they are queer *and* trans, *and* in ways that aren't cis normative. When you don't pass for what is acceptable, you really get a lot of shit for it.

I've been thinking, as we all have, about the shooting that happened recently at Club Q in Colorado Springs. Before that, there was the shooting at Pulse nightclub. An arsonist burned down Rash in New York when it was just building up to be something. Queer spaces are under attack in this way. I don't know how to word this, but we party despite all the signals from society. We're still out here, making space, having fun, being creative. Doing what we need for our sanity, our freedom.

Trans visibility was important and a lot of good came from it, but even while it was happening, there were a lot of weird authenticity issues. It was definitely an important to kind of shift just in the ideologies revolving around clubs, and around trans people in the club. People joke that if you're trans, you're either a DJ, a sex worker, or a hairdresser. Three options only. Visibility was about just expanding upon what our capabilities are perceived as being. But there were a lot of unforeseen and weird problems and appropriations that came from it, and of course the tokenizing of people.

Alongside expanding the culture is expanding the music. I always think it's so funny how exclusive people are. I love genre bending. That was what I loved about Club Chai. I love almost all kinds of music. It really just depends on my mood and my vibe, even in my DJ sets. I'll bring in stuff that doesn't necessarily always work, but at least I take the plunge.

I love hip-hop, obviously, from growing up in the Bronx, even Cam'ron and real hood stuff. But I also love jazz. The other night I went to Blue Note with some old friends. I listened to jazz with my grandpa. Almost any black music I was exposed to growing up. It's always going to be a part of me. But then, especially as I got older, especially in college, I wasn't trying to study while listening to R&B or hip-hop.

Me and my friend Candy would listen to Siouxsie and the

Banshees. I love old-school punk stuff. Back in the day, when I was really getting into music, I started with earmilk.com and some Tumblr site called *post-punk*. That was me discovering new music outside of my norms, which were ballroom, hip-hop, and R&B. A lot of this other stuff was exotic to me. Especially stuff coming from the UK.

Here's a random story from when I was in college the first time, being this queer, black boy on campus. There was this black guy, who was probably gay, and he was a DJ who said, "oh, hey, next time I see you, I got something for you." He gave me a CD. And it was all these old-school house tracks and bitch beats, close to techno but definitely more house-y, from the same time that techno was being developed by the big names, by the boys, the cis straight men. That's why the bitch beats and stuff were happening, I feel, because it was the same vibe that the bros were doing with this added queer layer, and with Kevin Aviance or Harmonica Sunbeam doing something over it. Usually it was chanting, which was also in the ballrooms. Queer people, specifically queer people of color, were taking this music and putting their own touch on it.

That's been the motif, especially with New World Disorder, that was the combination that started it. Now the power is in my hands to form something. To add to this great fabric of queer nightlife. We can throw a party here and there and make a couple of bucks, but moving forward, I want there to be a good foundation for a business that someone can take over that employs trans people. Give people a break from doing sex work or whatever. Just give people different or additional avenues to make money.

The ballroom scene was so separate from nightlife, but Venus X and her party really started to bring it together more intentionally. That was the start of a new genre for me. One of my big faves, LSDXOXO, came out of that. I saw it happening, saw it before it happened. I was just this weirdo from the Bronx that never really fit in, even, you know, to the Bronx stereotype, didn't always fit into the ballroom stereotype, either, or even the nightlife stereotype. I didn't have any choice but to become an artist.

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Jasmine Infiniti is a nonbinary trans person-of-color artist and DJ who was born and raised in the Bronx. They are an integral part of House of Infiniti, the New York vogue house.